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ABSTRACT

Parents of exceptional children face numerous challenges in their efforts to meet the needs of their child. Reaction to the realization that a problem exists in the child's development or educational achievement may lead to emotional distress which can be self-defeating. Such parents often benefit from a direct approach to addressing these issues in a supportive atmosphere. Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET) can provide a useful foundation for a counseling and consultation program for the parents of exceptional children. RET suggests that parents' distress is a result of their negative and irrational appraisal of their child's problem. The practitioner generally begins by helping parents identify and challenge their negative emotions. This self-help orientation, if clearly presented to parents, helps them cope with their child more effectively and better assist in his/her special education. Within the context of the special education delivery system, RET can be applied in individual consultation, in parent education and training, and in ongoing group counseling and therapy. (JAC)

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Rational Emotive Approaches to the Problems of Parents with Exceptional Children: A Brief Overview.

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Recent trends towards parent involvement in special education have created special challenges for both parents and special educational professionals. Parents of exceptional children face numerous challenges in their daily efforts to meet the needs of their child. Their role as parent of an exceptional child not only includes the general requirements of parenting but also the need to cope with their child's atypical development, disturbing behavior and also involvement in their child's special education program. An effective partnership between parents and special educators can work towards achieving a maximum benefit from schooling for the exceptional child and can provide a broader base for advocacy efforts on behalf of special children. Special education professionals have recognized the value an effective partnership with parents and have responded with support services for parents including parent education, specific training, individual consultation and group counseling services. It is likely that as parents come to expect these support services from their child's special education service delivery system, this trend towards intervention in the problems of exceptional through consultation and counseling of their parents will continue.

Problems of the Parents of Exceptional Children:

While there is little question in the literature that the parents of exceptional children face many unique and difficult emotional and practical problems (Featherstone, 1980), it would be unfounded to assume that all parents of exceptional children are experiencing emotional disturbance and therefore require clinical intervention. However, the parents of exceptional children clearly have significantly more to cope with than other parents. They have no doubt lived with and worried about their child's atypical development and poor school performance for some time. The circumstances which lead to the identification, assessment and special education programming of their exceptional

child are often in themselves stressful and potentially psychologically distressing. While many parents report that they are relieved when they achieve special eductional intervention for their child, the special education program which expects parental involvement can further add stress to their life. These unique stressors involved in families with exceptional children when added to the many other practical and emotional problems facing families in our culture further strain parents' resources for coping. If increased parental involvement in special education is a desirable goal, then the parent's ability to cope with the unique emotional and practical demands of their objectively difficult circumstances with their child clearly merits our attention.

In addition to these general concerns regarding the stress of being a parent of an exceptional child, several authors have discussed the unique emotional reactions of parents of exceptional children (Barsch, 1968; Love, 1970; Kroth, 1975; Featherstone 1980; Karnes & Lee, 1980). Stages of reaction involving denial, anger, guilt and shame are considered common responses to the realization that a significant problem exists in a child's development and/or educational achievement. When these problems continue overtime, the parents' emotional distress is often significant in itself, has adverse effects on the parent-child relationship and presents a potential impediment to productive parental involvement in special education. Even parents who have realistically accepted their child's difficulty can be occasionally troubled by self-blame for not doing enough, excessive anger at others who do not "understand" their child or a tendency to overprotect or pity the child. Some parents suffer from guilt about other family members or make unrealistic demands on them. Others are consumed with the search with the perfect solution for their child's difficulty with excessive anger at all concerned when inevitably, one is not forthcoming. All of these distressing emotional responses can be self-defeating in that they interfere with the parents' often expressed goal of maximum developmental and

educational progress for the child.

In the author is experience, parents of exceptional children benefit from a direct approach to addressing these emotional and self-management issues. Given a supportive atmosphere, these issues can be directly discussed and training in cognitive-behavioral coping strategies provided. This can be done compatibly with other forms of parent training or involvement. Parents less troubled by excessive negative emotions and self-defeating attitudes can be more fully involved in their child's special education program. With resolution of some of these emotionally distressing issues, they can also more fully participate in counseling and training to address important practical concerns such as improving child management strategies. They can also be more open to information sharing about their child's condition, special education procedures, parent and child rights and community resources. The principles and techniques of Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET) can provide a potentially useful foundation upon which to develop a consultation and counseling program for the parents of exceptional children with the explicit aim of helping them learn to help themselves so that they can better help their special child.

An RET Approach to the Problems of Parents with Exceptional Children:

In the literature on RET, a number of authors have addressed the problems experienced by parents with special emphasis on emotional self-management for the parents so that the parent can better manage the child. RET as described by Ellis (e.g., 1977) focuses on helping people reduce their negative emotions and self-defeating behavior by changing the patterns of irrational thinking that produce them. Several practitioners have developed RET counseling strategies specifically for parents' problems with their children (Hauck, 1977, 1983; Ellis, 1978; DiGiuseppe, 1981, 1982; Ellis and Bernard, 1983). Works by Hauck (1972) Ellis, Wolf and Mosley (1978) and Waters (1980) are specifically written for parents and emphasize strengthening the parents' coping skills. They suggest a

variety of self-help strategies as well as having a strong orientation toward preventing childhood emotional disturbance through rational child management. For the most part, a philosophy of parenting is presented rather than a how-to guide for specific difficulties in child management. Waters (1980) is probably the most practically useful work for parent training and counseling applications. Structured and readable presentations on topics including building frustration tolerance, self-acceptance, managing anger and fear, and developing rational problem-solving skills for both parent and child are provided. Numerous specific and practical suggestions in each of these areas are included. Each unit includes a child's story which illustrates the unit's theme and is a useful learning device for the child and the parent reader.

Some years ago, Ellis and Grieger (1977) suggested that RET might have specific therapeutic value when applied to the special problems encountered by parents of exceptional children. McInerney (1983a, 1983b) has outlined some general principles and special therapeutic considerations encountered in the application of RET to consultation and group counseling with these parents. The Rational-Emotive approach to intervention in parents' problems about their exceptional child assumes the perspective that when parents are excessively distressed about their child's difficulty, this distress often interferes with the parents' efforts to help the child. As in other application of RET, a further premise is that the parents' distress is largely the result of their excessively negative and irrational appraisal of the child's difficulty. Parents of special education children are continually evaluating their child's current behavior and school performance. They frequently appraise the meaning of this behavior with regard to the future. Further, they often evaluate their personal adequacy based on these appraisals of the child's progress. Since this thinking is automatic and overlearned, parents are often unaware of it. This type of evaluative thinking which is based on beliefs or rules about reality

which, while not necessarily conscious, can be shown to result in emotional distress and self-defeating behavior. For example, the parent who believes that their child should not have difficulties in achieving in school or who evaluates the child's poor achievement as an indication of inevitably disasterous future consequences will, as a result, be quite upset when confronted with it. They may as a result over or under-respond to this situation through criticism of the child and/or of the special education system. This criticism may establish a self-defeating style which might further undermine the child's self-esteem and/or the credibility of the special education delivery. When the effectiveness of special education is undermined, motivational and behavioral difficulties in a special child can be expected. All of these difficulties might then be further complicated by a negative appraisal of the parents' self-worth as a result of the growing difficulties. Parental anger and guilt as a result might further exacerbate the parents' ability to cope with their special child.

McInerney (1983a) has outlined several basic therapeutic considerations which are important in rational-emotive work with the parents of exceptional children. Because many parents of exceptional children have had rather negative experiences with professionals, an understandable but problematic defensiveness often needs to be initially addressed. For this reason, rapport and other relationship development issues are important considerations. In this regard, it is useful to clearly and simply state the rationale for parent consultation or counseling at the outset. Further, in the interest of initial rapport, it is useful to reinforce a self-help atmosphere. Parents will more readily expect to help themselves and their child by openly discussing their thoughts, feelings and action in relation to their child when they see a purpose to it. It is often useful then to reinforce self-disclosure by personally modeling it and by active listening or an empathic restatement of the parents' thoughts and feelings. Verbal behavior that promotes the parents' view of the therapist is both credible

and trustworthy also helps establish rapport. The therapist in various ways can state that he or she has knowledge and experience relevant to the parents' concerns about themselves and their child. This trustworthiness and credibility can be further aided when the therapist, such as a school psychologist plays other roles in the child's total special education program. In this respect, the parent can come to view the therapist as an expert with relevant training and experience with handicapped children. As in all other applications of RET, the therapist can be most persuasive when seen in this light and when the parent comes to recognize that the therapist has a genuine concern about the child and the family's developmental progress. The inaccurate stereotype of the argumentative RET practitioner not withstanding, it is important in work with this special population to maintain a credible relationship in order to be able to effectively proceed toward persuading the parent of an exceptional child to view their circumstances differently.

While therapeutic styles within the rational-emotive framework differ (Wessler & Wessler, 1980) the rational-emotive practitioner generally begins to address the parents' problems by helping them to identify their excessive negative emotions and its consequences. Once this is done, efforts are then directed at the evaluative thinking which produces these self-defeating emotions and behaviors. Evaluative thinking based on misinformation or misconceptions can be directly confronted with more accurate or realistic information. Inflexible rules about children and overgeneralized attributions about self-worth based on appraisal of the child's performance are more difficult but also can be directly addressed. The therapist uses dialogue, questions, discussion and suggested experiences to help persuade the parent that there are other more reasonable ways to view the child's problem and that the self-defeating cycle can be broken if the parent learns to identify and challenge the irrational thoughts that maintain it. Once the utility of this approach is established, the parent can then

encouraged to persist in using it by identifying and challenging self-defeating thoughts on their own. A more rational philosophy of parenting the exceptional child as well as the sound behavioral child management skills needed to implement this philosophy can also be promoted. Once this groundwork has been established, specific plans to help a given parent better manage specific problems can be discussed, empirically tried out and evaluated realistically with modifications made as needed.

Teaching individuals to recognize and then dispute their irrational appraisals of their circumstances as well as persuading them to do so vigorously and often is the central therapeutic method of RET. While using disputation or persuasion with parents of exceptional children is theoretically no different than that undertaken with other client populations, it is important to recognize that the parents of many exceptional children are particularly sensitive to what they might view as criticism of themselves or their child. Disputation is then best done sensitively with attention to both the content and timing of these disputes. Directed Socratic dialogue is ideal for this purpose. While the antecedent events discussed with parents of exceptional children, the "A's" in RET terminology, are often quite objectively painful for the parent, the essential philosophy and techniques of Rational-Emotive disputation including cognitive,behavioral and imaginal strategies are essentially the same (Wessler & Wessler, 1980; Walen, DiGiuseppe & Wessler, 1980). The effective therapist will listen for misperceptions regarding the disputation process. It is important that the parents of exceptional children not view disputation as an attempt to deny their strong feelings or to dismiss or trivialize their concerns about what are to them quite serious practical problems. These parents in particular seem to be very sensitive to what they might view as "blame" for their child's difficulty. If such misperceptions occur, they should be corrected. In all cases, persistence in disputation is required.

While space here does not permit an extensive discussion of RET technique as applied to the parents of exceptional children, this is available in more detail in the author's other works (McInerney, 1983a, 1983b). The interested practitioner can also refer to the growing literture on RET practice for specific ideas (e.g. Hauck, 1980; Walen, DiGuiseppe & Wessler, 1980; Wessler & Wessler, 1980). It should be recalled that effective RET oriented counseling and consultation for parents of exceptional children does not simply consist of telling parents that their problems with their child are not "awful". RET's model of human distress, however, can provide a valuable integrating philosophy for diverse forms of parent skills, training, education and parent involvement. The essential rationale for using this approach with these parents is to provide an effective and efficient means for helping them to better cope with and help their special child. In this context, short-term structured group methods of counseling can be used effectively with added advantage of encouraging parent-to-parent networks of support and self-help. In addition, individual and time limited consultation can be provided in order to address specific presenting problems. RET can also be used as an aid in parental decision making regarding their special child. In all work of this sort, it is important to develop positive and realistic expectations about the benefits of this intervention in order to encourage participation. If care is taken to develop and maintain a practical problem-solving orientation, then it is the author's experience that the approach has pragmatic appeal which helps motivates participation, has considerable effectiveness when applied to specific problems and is efficient in terms of scarce professional resources.

Summary and Conclusions:

Based on over eight years of clinical experience, it is the author's contention that the basic theory and techniques of RET can be effectively and efficiently applied to the problems experienced by the parents of exceptional

children. As a persuasive approach towards providing relatively immediate assistance regarding the cognitive-emotive and behavioral problems experienced by this group, RET can be effectively implemented within the limitations of most special education delivery systems. The essential rationale of this approach is to provide practical assistance for parents in their efforts to cope with their exceptional child so that they can better assist in their special education. This self-help orientation, if clearly presented to parents, has considerable practical appeal. Even difficult emotional situations involving basic acceptance of the exceptional child, guilt and/or depression about having the problem in the first place, anger and frustration tolerance concerning the educational system and the parents' self-acceptance and management of their own emotional distress can be effectively and efficiently addressed. Within the special education delivery system context, RET can be applied in individual consultation, parent education and presentations, parent training in terms of structured experiences aimed at specific problems as well as in ongoing group counseling or therapy. While outcome studies regarding the utilization of this approach are at present unavailable and certainly, most of us working in applied settings will have difficulty conducting rigorous outcome research into the therapeutic efficacy of these applications, this is clearly indicated and to be encouraged. In the absence of specific empirical evidence, however, the potential benefit of this approach on theoretical grounds and in terms of many practitioners clinical experience suggests considerable potential for therapeutic value.

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